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NAVY MEDICINE IN FOCUS

On Pins and Needles: Navy Doctor Branches out with Deployment Medicine

BY VJOHNSON – JANUARY 3, 2014

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Navy Lt. Orlando Cabrera (left), a native of Plainfield, N.J., uses a sensor to locate an acupuncture point on the ear of a patient at the combined aid station on Camp Leatherneck, Helmand province, Afghanistan. Cabrera, a physician and medical acupuncturist, routinely uses the age-old practice of acupuncture to treat servicemembers with physical or emotional issues at the base.

Story by Cpl. Paul Peterson, Regional Command Southwest Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan

CAMP LEATHERNECK, Afghanistan – Strange isn't quite the right word for some of the treatments received by Marines and sailors who visit the combined aid station here. The tiny needles protruding from their ears, elbows and feet, a telltale sign of acupuncture, are an unorthodox scene in a military medical facility.

For several months, Navy Lt. Orlando Cabrera, a physician and medical acupuncturist, has been treating everything from combat trauma to sore shoulders and anxiety with his unique set of medical skills.

"I'm a physician first," said Cabrera, a native of Plainfield, N.J. "The reason I can do acupuncture is because I'm a physician. If someone comes in with a headache, I still have to think about [traditional medicine] that can fix it."

Still, acupuncture is more than a novel treatment for Cabrera. The pins he places at strategic points along his patients' skin helps alleviate an assortment of ailments by stimulating the body in positive ways. Regardless of the underlying explanations, he's seen it work firsthand.

"I always had this nagging pain in my right shoulder," he said. "The first time I was treated, I was like, 'Wow, the pain went away.' I even felt better the next day. I wasn't the usual crabby guy I normally am," he joked.

Cabrera has memorized the subtle look of disbelief that forms on the face of his more skeptical patients. They'll flex their muscles and suddenly realize the pain has abated. It's a genuine surprise to many of them.

"You give it more and more chances, and seeing the patients walk away happy is the big thing," said Cabrera. "A lot of times I'll give prescriptions, or I'll talk to people. I'll make people feel better with my words or medicines, but I don't see the immediate effects."

Cabrera has been practicing acupuncture alongside traditional medicine for nearly two years now. He's sold on its

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effectiveness. The trick is to let the patients try it out and experience the results for themselves.

He's not the first doctor to employ the technique in the military. The Navy began sending physicians for acupuncture training as a method to treat Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and traumatic brain injuries, said Cabrera.

"Thankfully, I haven't had many opportunities to treat [battlefield traumas]," said Cabrera. "I'd rather treat no patients at all than be very busy."

He said the treatments he has done with patients suffering from combat injuries or psychological traumas have proven successful. In one particular case, he said he could see the strain etched into the patient's face. He was irritable and unsettled by his experiences before receiving acupuncture.

"He said for the first time he felt normal," said Cabrera. "His headaches went away. He felt happy."

The treatments aren't a cure-all, stressed Cabrera. If a person comes in with a back spasm one day, they aren't necessarily going to be cured after a 20 or 30 minute session. But odds are they will leave feeling quite a bit better.

"Wow, is the big word that comes out," he said.

Many people start off feeling like acupuncture is a little taboo or some sort of placebo effect. But it's just not the case, said Cabrera.

"They usually are amazed that something that simple can be so effective," he continued. "There are certain treatments that will take a little longer to work. They'll have their skepticism, but for the most part my patients are very happy with the results."

Most of Cabrera's medical treatments are still traditional, especially when dealing with life threatening situations. The work he does with his patients is more or less what he would have done to himself, and he's spent his fair share of time under the needles.

"At one point, I would gather I had about 40 needles in me, which wasn't necessarily fun," said Cabrera, who considers himself somewhat needle shy. "I don't like getting needles, but I know it's such a great feeling [afterward]. Some people find absolute pleasure in it. It's very different for everybody."

The fundamental idea behind the practice is to create a sort of balance within the body. Like doing Tai Chi and other forms of meditation, the needles are supposed to help move and balance out the natural energy, or Chi, of the body.

"There's a deep ache associated with the needle," he said.
"It's not a bad feeling. It's kind of like badness leaving the area."

Some patients are more squeamish than others, but by and large they end up enjoying the process, said Cabrera. His treatments have been particularly effective with the stress and anxiety that commonly accompanies military service.

"The Chi seems to get stuck in certain points, for lack of a better term," said Cabrera. "By putting a needle in there, I move the Chi along its normal flow."

It's a unique experience for many patients as they try to wrap their mind around how a needle inserted into the webbing between their fingers helped with a sinus issue, or how a single needle between their eyes helped tame their anxieties. Explaining the process is just part of the medicine for Cabrera.

He starts off his sessions with a relaxed, frank discussion of the process. He genuinely enjoys the back and forth with patients ... and the look on their face when it works.

As a doctor, acupuncture is one of those few times he gets to see the immediate effects of his medicine, but it's still just one tool in his arsenal. He hopes the practice will gain more acceptances with time.

He's already seen the first steps in that direction during his work at Camp Leatherneck.

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